'Beat' Watergate Crisis, Nixon Aim

F Post 9/19/73

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WASHINGTON (NEA)

It becomes increasingly clear with each passing day that President Nixon believes he can fight his way out of his "Watergate crisis" as he has told the nation he did six times before, in his own well known book.

His return to the press conference format in what at least has the surface look of a fighting posture, his radio speech to the nation and his new "state of the union" message calling for a turning of the spotlight back to other problems, these and other presidential stirrings all suggest the "comeback" tactic he has made virtually a lifetime trademark.

Yet these things may be self-deceptive. The Ervin Senate committee's hearings still have weeks to go, though the pressures on it to wind up quickly are growing stronger. The pressures appear to have been buttressed by returning lawmakers who say their soundings "back home" indicate many Americans think the hearings have gone on long enough. Since Watergate may hurt all politicians, some of these "findings" may in fact be self-serving.

Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox is moving doggedly into the indictment stage against several Watergate figures, even as he waits anxiously for court rulings he hopes will give him personal access and decision power over presidential tapes he deems applicable to Watergate.

Former Nixon Cabinet members John Mitchell and Maurice Stans are accused in New York in the so-called "influence" case involving Robert Vesco. Four administration aides, including former top helper John Ehrlichman, have been indicted in California in connection with burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office.

The resumed Senate hearings, and the open testimony in trials that may stretch out over many months if not years, will keep Watergate alive and very likely compel the President to respond to it again and again, no matter how much he would like to put it behind him.

It is undoubtedly true that most Americans are more concerned about the economy and, as it affects their gasoline tanks and their home-heating oil, the energy crisis.

But the inescapable drumming away on Watergate is unlikely to restore their badly weakened confidence in Richard Nixon as the man of high judgment capable of dealing with these dilemmas with impressive success.

Whether he was directly involved in Watergate or merely blind to what was going on (a notion many voters find hard to swallow), Mr. Nixon's star has been dimmed by the events of 1973 and before. There is a serious chance he may never recover stature, that, if he hangs on through 1976, he will limp and stumble much of the way.

What such an eventuality would do to the President as a man and public figure is difficult to guess. In his book, "Six Crises," he spoke of his major troubles as a kind of catharsis which in the end left him strengthened. He wrote:

"Crisis can indeed be agony. But it is the exquisite agony which a man might not want to experience again — yet would not for the world have missed."

But none of the earlier crises of which he wrote had the magnitude or enduring quality of Watergate. This, his seventh crisis, may be the one where the agony never really ends, the one which puts the stamp of tragedy upon the career of the man who never dreamed the presidency could be anything but triumph. If the agony lingers, the presidency may be his prison.

(NEWSPAPER ENTERPRISE ASSN)